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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Revisioning Madame Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast' in Emma Donoghue's 'the Tale of the Rose' and the 2017 Disney Version: A Queer Reading

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### ABSTRACT

Madame Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast' has become one of the most popular fairy tales to be appropriated in both text and screen over the years. This paper analyses how Donoghue's reinterpretation of this classic tale in 'The Tale of the Rose' counters heteropatriarchal discourses about masculinity and femininity through a lesbian subject position. This paper attempts a queer reading of the 2017 Disney live action musical *Beauty and the Beast* and demonstrates how it challenges the heteronormative ideals of Madame Beaumont's tale. The paper further interrogates how these later appropriations engage in activism by encouraging a dialogue about gender diversity in the mainstream. This will be done using lesbian feminism, queer theory, and adaptation of fairy tales as theoretical framework.

### KEYWORDS

Beauty and the Beast; appropriation; heteronormativity; gender diversity; lesbian subject position

### Queering the fairy tale

In the Introduction to *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill have outlined different layers of queerness in fairy tales- both classic tales and their adaptations.<sup>1</sup> Multiple layers of meaning operate in the structure of fairy tales. While the surface level realistic narrative upholds patriarchal, normative and heterosexual ideals, elements of fantasy in the deep structure of the tales provide a space for going beyond conventional morality and gender norms, more so to represent queer sexuality, gender and desire (Turner and Greenhill 6). This structure is quite evident in the folktale of 'Rose Red and Snow White' in which a prince in the guise of a bear disrupts the feminine household of Rose Red and Snow White by seeking shelter from the cold. Eventually the prince marries Snow White and his brother marries Rose Red. The female homosocial bonding of Rose Red and Snow White is dismantled and a patriarchal heteronormative family structure is established at the end of the tale.<sup>2</sup> When classic fairy tales deal with the theme of quest for identity, issues of marginalisation, oddity and not fitting in come into play (Turner and Greenhill 6). In cases where the subconscious fears and desires of the protagonist are non-normative in nature, they are represented subtly through symbolic codes. The representation of non-normative sexuality, gender and desire in fairy tales depends on a number of factors like medium, forces of

production, distribution and reception and interaction with socio- cultural discourses of the times.<sup>3</sup>

From its earliest written form as Apulieus' 'Cupid and Psyche',<sup>4</sup> in folkloric form as tales of animal bridegrooms like 'The Frog King', to Disney animated film *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the tale of 'Beauty and the Beast' has flourished in multiple forms. This paper takes up three retellings of the tale of 'Beauty and the Beast' – Madame Leprince de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast', Emma Donoghue's 'The Tale of the Rose', and Disney's live action musical *Beauty and the Beast*. Madame Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast' is the most popular and influential version of the tale which has served as a foundational text for later adaptations. This paper takes Madame Beaumont's text as the template for analysing the changing symbolism of Beauty and Beast corresponding to changing definitions of masculinity and femininity in later retellings. Unlike many other adaptations, Emma Donoghue's 'The Tale of the Rose'<sup>5</sup> moves beyond the male/female binary of Beaumont's tale and challenges the heteronormative ideals of Madame Beaumont's text. So Donoghue's tale has been chosen to examine the dismantling of dominant heteronormative ideology and establishment of a lesbian narrative using lesbian feminism as a theoretical framework. This paper attempts a deconstructive reading of the Disney live action musical *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and portrayal of non- normative forms of sexuality and gender in different media – the print and the screen, and explores the reasons for appropriations of the text. As the earliest cinematic adaptation of 'Beauty and the Beast,' Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* has influenced the plot of the 2017 Disney *Beauty and the Beast*. The queer subtext of Cocteau's film makes it a forerunner of the 2017 Disney film in terms of representing a queer aesthetic. So it has been discussed briefly before moving onto the 2017 Disney film. The 1991 animated Disney film *Beauty and the Beast* has not been taken up in this paper because it does not have sufficient queer subtext for a meaningful scrutiny of the representation of nonnormative forms of desire which is the focus of this paper.

### Heteronormativity in Madame Leprince de Beaumont's BATB<sup>6</sup>

Tracing the origin and development of the literary fairy tale, Jack Zipes has observed that most literary fairy tales have their origin in the tradition of oral folklore (2013). However, as Jan-Öjvind Swahn has noted, the tale of Beauty and the Beast is an exception as it was shaped simultaneously by the oral and the written traditions.<sup>7</sup> Madame Leprince de Beaumont's 'La Belle et la Bête' published in 1757 in *Magasin des Enfants* became the foundational text and influenced all later adaptations. This was translated into German and published in 1758 under the title *Der Frau Maria le Prince de Beaumont Lehren der Tugend und Weisheit für die Jugend: Aus dem französischen übersetzt. Mit einer Vorrede des Herrn Consistorialrath Rambachs*.<sup>8</sup> Three years later the English version was published in the *Young Misses Magazine* in 1761.<sup>9</sup> Since then it became the key model for most of the Beauty and the Beast adaptations in the Western world in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries like Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (1946) and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1990). Madame Beaumont's version was an adaptation of earlier written versions of the tale like Madame d'Aulnoy's 'Le Mouton' (1697) and Madame Villeneuve's *La Belle et la Bête* (1740). Madame Beaumont borrowed

heavily from Madame Villeneuve's *La Belle et la Bête* in terms of plot and incidents. She abridged Madame Villeneuve's tale of three hundred and forty-one pages to twenty-five pages by removing elements not directly related to the main plot and by simplifying the narrative.<sup>10</sup> Madame Beaumont also modified Madame Villeneuve's tale to make it suitable for children by changing the structure of the plot so that Beauty does not have to sleep with the Beast in order to transform him into a human. Rather the Beast changes into a striking prince when Beauty splashes water on his head and promises to marry him.

Bruno Bettelheim has read the beasts in folktales about animal bridegrooms like pigs, rats, etc. as concealed symbols of sexuality.<sup>11</sup> In his discussion *Beauty and the Beast*, Bettelheim has noted that these animal bridegrooms appear to be frightening and repulsive to the female protagonist at first, but when she finally directs her affection from her parents to a suitable partner and gains maturity, they no longer seem monstrous. In the course of the tale, the female protagonist learns to accept masculine sexuality as she learns to love the Beast (Talairach-Vielmas 275). Both Maria Tatar and Marina Warner have observed that the tale of 'Beauty and the Beast' have proliferated among women at time when upper class ladies had very little control over their marriage partners. Maria Tatar has read the beast as a literal representation of 'old wives' wisdom' about masculine sexuality as beastly (*Hard Facts* 177). Maria Tatar has also interpreted the beasts in 'Beauty and the Beast' tales as embodiments of the anxieties of young ladies who were being forced into marriages and therefore may perceive their husbands as threatening figures capable of killing or injuring them (*Hard Facts* 177).

Marina Warner has reflected on the transformation of the Beast into human form in tales of this group and argued that women narrators of 'Beauty and the Beast' confront the fear of the 'male Other' during the course of the tale (Warner). In fact, this 'terrifying encounter with Otherness, to its acceptance, or in some versions of the story, its annihilation' (Warner) forms the crux of the narrative. Some retellings like Disney's animated film *Beauty and the Beast* and the more recent live action musical *Beauty and the Beast* follow Madame Beaumont's resolution of the Beast transforming into a human form to unite with Beauty. Others like Leonora Carrington, Angela Carter<sup>12</sup> ('The Tiger's Bride') and later Francesca Lia Block<sup>13</sup> ('Beast') have chosen to explore erotic possibilities for the heroine by transforming her into a beast (Warner). Moving away from these two narrative trajectories, Emma Donoghue's 'The Tale of the Rose' explores the possibilities of non-normative sexuality and gender in the plot of 'Beauty and the Beast' by replacing the male beast with a female one. Donoghue deconstructs the context of male/female sexuality and heteronormative marriage of the traditional narrative through the portrayal of lesbian love between the two female protagonists. She has used a female first-person narrator and metaphorical language of fairy tales to stretch the limits of the plot of 'Beauty and the Beast' while preserving fairy tale conventions.

### **From normative to queer: Donoghue's lesbian beast**

When Emma Donoghue adapted the tale of 'Beauty and the Beast' in 'the tale of the Rose,' she was conscious of being a part of the tradition of feminist retelling of fairy tales by authors like Anne Sexton and Angela Carter. The idea of reimagining fairy tales had been suggested to her by the late Roisin Conroy of Attic Press but she eventually

published her collection of interconnected fairy tales with Virago Books.<sup>14</sup> Donoghue has observed how in the course of time these tales have been interpreted in different ways by changing audiences (Donoghue *Civic Theatre*). The rise of different socio-cultural movements has enabled audiences to reinterpret her tales and find newer meanings in them. For example, the 'Me Too' movement drew attention to the power struggles between men and women and particular context to interpret elements of women's empowerment in her stories. Similarly, the fight for the rights of the LGBTQ community gained momentum during the 1970s and 1980s influenced her book as well. The AIDS epidemic, backlash against people of the LGBTQ community, and formation of groups like the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power to fight back against such prejudice, and campaign for their rights formed the backdrop of Donoghue's project of revisioning fairy tales. As the debates about rights of people with non-normative sexuality and gender gained ground, it became a part of mainstream discourse enabling Donoghue to write about non-normative desires even within a formulaic genre like fairy tales.

Madame Beaumont's tale has two trajectories – Beauty's journey from her father's household to the Beast's castle, and the Beast's transformation from animal to human form. It is especially invested in heterosexual signifying language in its representation of courtship rituals. Donoghue keeps the plot of Madame Beaumont's tale intact but deconstructs the language and symbolism of the classic tale to represent non-normative love and desire. Rather invested in patriarchal and heterosexual discourses about rigid masculine and feminine gender roles, Donoghue's female protagonist repeatedly consults mirrors to appraise herself when her suitors court her and later abandon her. Her subjectivity remains a 'negative' one- she is not defined in her own right but she functions to validate the masculine subject.<sup>15</sup> In the context of fairy tales, mirrors have a sinister connotation as living characters who become reflections in the mirror forfeit their agency and become passive figureheads in other characters' stories.<sup>16</sup> Here Beauty conforms to the stereotypical passive and beautiful fairy tale heroine or damsel in distress waiting for a male rescuer.

But when she goes to the Beast's castle where she has greater agency, she creates her own identity sitting in front of the gilded mirror – 'The more hideous my imaginings, the more my own face seemed to glow. Because I thought the beast must be everything I am not: dark to my light, rough to my smooth, hoarse to my sweet.' (Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch*, 35). Here the protagonist defines the Beast in terms of an Other- the Beast does not have any subjectivity of his/her own. Similar to Stephen Gordon in front of the mirror in *The Well of Loneliness* who is unable to define herself trapped in a heterosexual matrix which only recognises heterosexuality, the Beast is defined negatively in terms of a lack. Teresa de Lauretis has talked about the representation of lesbian desire within the dominant heterosexual culture and language as 'aberrant' or 'perverse' since it is 'constituted in relation to [its] sexual difference from socially dominant, institutionalised heterosexual forms'.<sup>17</sup> The Beast is similarly described as a deviant by the female protagonist. The Beast is designated as a 'shadow' which the female protagonist throws behind her.

Finally, when the heroine removes the mask from the Beast, she is taken aback to see that it is a woman. The heroine realises that the beast is a woman who had refused to marry men, wore a mask and became isolated from society, but there was 'nothing monstrous' (Donoghue *Kissing the Witch* 39) about her. Jennifer Orme has referred to this as

a 'queer moment'<sup>18</sup> which challenges normative discourses by interrupting Beauty's understanding of her own desires. Donoghue's tale deconstructs the heteronormative template of man/woman and human/monster of Beaumont's classic tale by changing the symbolic significance of the rose in Beaumont's tale. While in Beaumont's tale the rose signifies the Beast's declaration of love, youth or virginity, in Donoghue's tale it becomes a symbol of feminine sexuality and lesbian desire. The description of Donoghue's Beast in terms reminiscent of the Grimm Brothers' Snow White – '... hair black as rocks under water ... face white as old linen ... lips red as a rose just opening' challenge the heteronormative ideal of femininity and replace it with a queer one as seen from Beauty's perspective.

Vanessa Joosen has discussed how Bruno Bettelheim explains the categories 'Beautiful' and 'Beastly' in terms of the sexual desires of the female protagonist who must redirect them from the father to a suitable male partner.<sup>19</sup> This reading has been challenged by several authors like Angela Carter in 'The Tiger's Bride' and Francesca Lia Block's 'Beast' in which the heroines become 'beastly' and live happily ever after with the Beast. Donoghue's retelling also dismantles this Oedipal reading by declaring that both the women protagonists are either beauties or beasts. Donoghue challenges the heteronormative discourses which define non-normative desires as 'deviant' or 'perverse.' She has declared her support for the rights of LGBTQ people and the role of literature in activism in an interview with Abby Palko, saying that 'the more novels there are out there that matter-of-factly feature a lesbian couple, the more mainstream it becomes'.<sup>20</sup> While her other novels like *Stir Fry* and *Hood* have featured themes like coming out and lesbian desire more prominently, 'The Tale of the Rose' deals with this topic metaphorically since she wanted to preserve the basic conventions of the fairy tale in her story.

## **Queering the categories beauty/beast in Disney's 'Beauty and the Beast' (2017)**

### ***The homoerotic subtext in Jean Cocteau's 'La Belle et la Bête'***

Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (1946) is the earliest cinematic adaptation of Madame Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast.' The changes made by Jean Cocteau in the plot of the tale, enchanted objects in the form of moving parts of bodies, and the representation of the Beast as an animal dressed like a human set the precedent for all later cinematic adaptations of the tale. Unlike Madame Beaumont's text, Jean Cocteau shifted the narrative to focus on the Beast's story and male perspective. This has influenced the Disney adaptations of 'Beauty and the Beast', both the animated film and the live action musical which have given equal importance to both trajectories – the Beast's transformation, and Belle's progress. Critics like Cynthia Erb<sup>21</sup> have noted the subtle homoerotic dimension in Cocteau's film in the rivalry between the Beast and Avenant, a new character introduced by Jean Cocteau as Belle's suitor. Cocteau's partner and actor Jean Marais played the roles of Beast/Prince and Avenant as well which shifted the focus of the film towards him. The body of Marais has been highlighted by the film as a spectacle – sometimes masked as a beast, at other times as a handsome suitor. The fetishisation of the male body culminates into Avenant's transformation into a Beast right before his death.

Simultaneously the Beast metamorphoses into the Prince. This creates the illusion that the gracious 'Beast' is being rejected and Avenant is rewarded with Belle's love. The pattern of homosocial bonding between Avenant and the Beast portrayed by Cocteau consists of rivalry for a woman following Eve Sedgwick's scheme (Erb 54). The triangulation of the romance and homosocial relationship between the two suitors was adapted in the 1991 Disney animated film<sup>22</sup> and the 2017 musical.<sup>23</sup>

### **The 2017 Disney version**

Although the Walt Disney Corporation has had a significant number of employees who were a part of the LGBTQ community, discussions about possible queer subtexts of Disney films is a fairly recent phenomenon. Like early forerunners of New Queer Cinema which portrayed non-normative gender and sexuality in a veiled and subtle manner using coded language and sexually ambiguous characters, queer readings of some Disney films have provided interesting interpretations. Although the intent of the writers and the Director have not been stated explicitly, the character of Elsa in *Frozen* has been widely seen by audiences as a potential queer character since she does not seek the stereotypical heterosexual union.<sup>24</sup> When the live action musical *Beauty and the Beast* was released in 2017, Director Bill Condon teased audiences about a 'gay moment' in the film. *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) continues the Disney tradition of representing queer elements through veiled subtexts, ambiguity and coded language.

Critics Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan have claimed that the LGBTQ characters in Disney films like *Aladdin* (1992) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) have remained as non-active agents or onlookers and often put on the fringes.<sup>25</sup> Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan have interpreted the male homosocial bonding as a phallocentric one in which homosexuality is implicit (136–137). In *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) too, LeFou functions as Gaston's faithful sidekick building up and supporting him through the entire length of the film until Gaston abandons him. The Director Bill Condon intended to portray LeFou as a character who is confused about his desire and sexuality.<sup>26</sup> The actor who played the role of LeFou, Josh Gad, however did not concur to this idea. Likewise, the other actors of the film came in support of Josh Gad.<sup>27</sup>

However, despite all the claims made by the actors and the Director, the film faced tremendous backlash in several countries since it was assumed to support homosexuality.<sup>28</sup> Eventually Bill Condon commented that the supposed 'gay moment' is only a minor detail but has attracted a lot of unwarranted attention to the film. Owing to the huge protests, the marketing and publicity of the film was made in such a way that it only focussed on the love story of *Beauty and the Beast* through posters, interviews, etc. following in the footsteps of the previous Disney films.

In the Disney version the character Belle appears like a 'gay diva'<sup>29</sup> (Byrne and Martin McQuillan 141) as she refuses to get into heterosexual relationship with Gaston. Undoubtedly she is portrayed as a queer icon who subverts the heteronormative gender binaries. Further she rejects the traditional gender roles prescribed for women and helps her father and extends all aid to her father in his scientific projects.

The Beast in the Disney musical remains isolated from the villagers and can be read deconstructively as a potentially queer presence since he is misunderstood by the villagers and perceived to be threatening when seen in the light of Harry Benshoff's reading of the



monster figure in films.<sup>30</sup> Benshoff views the Beast as a ‘shadowy Other’ of heterosexuality, emphasising the ‘subtextual and connotative avenues’. Director Bill Condon has interpreted the beast as an embodiment of AIDS – an epidemic which was causing havoc in the LGBTQ community. The transformation of the Beast into human form at the end of the film restores order through unambiguous heterosexual closure. Thus, Disney’s live action musical *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) continues this tradition of the queer as monstrous through the portrayal of the Beast.

In the film when Stanley and his friends are cross dressed by the closet, they do not react to it while in the earlier version of Disney film their embarrassment was deployed for comic effect. Further at the party LeFou dances with Stanley. This short sequence speaks loud and depicts a significant distancing from all the previous versions of the film. The performance of feminine gender roles by the male characters engenders veiled symbolism which offers different meanings to the audience allowing them to think about the different sexualities. The Stanley LeFou dance sequence clearly demarcates the queer subtext and reminds one of the Drag Ball subculture of New York of the 1980s and is coded with layered meanings for the audience to decode. There is an inherent activist stance in the dance sequence as it embodies all the elements of gender fluidity. Thus, the Disney version counters the heteropatriarchal discourses of the classic tale through a queer angle by encouraging dialogues about gender diversity, though covertly.

## Conclusion

Madame Beaumont’s ‘Beauty and the Beast’ provided the heteronormative template for later adaptations of the tale. Emma Donoghue’s ‘The Tale of the Rose’ challenged the heteronormative ideals of Madame Beaumont’s tale and represented lesbian desire metaphorically within the structure of the classic tale. Donoghue represents the lesbian relationship subtly keeping in mind the reception of her discourse on diverse sexualities in the wake of LGBTQ activism and limitations of the fairy tale as a genre. Unlike the previous two versions, the Disney version adopts elements of humour and veiled symbolism. It joins the LGBTQ activism with an objective to mainstream discourses on diverse sexualities but succeeds only partially in its attempt as it prioritises the mass reception of the film and its marketability and does not touch the subject candidly.

## Notes

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